

SOME OTHER WOMEN

SHORT STORIES BY MATT PIERARD

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*Picture a drone, flying over the countryside. It is small enough not to be noticed by the average person.
It picks up all sorts of data...*

**THE OTHER GIRL
HER REPUTATION
SO
ONE
CHANGES
DIGNITY
GRACE
FAMILY
NO SHE DIDN'T**

THE OTHER GIRL

The look on his upturned face was endearing. *This should have been my child*, she thought.

Camille had gone to the park on a whim. It was early spring, a little humid, moreso along the river. Spanish moss drizzled from the massive old-growth trees. Black alligators sunned themselves on the opposite banks as the water flowed by.

As she leaned over the wall to watch, a young woman in a long sari-like dress picked her away along the near-bank below the wall walking a small mutt terrier. She recognized her as John's wife almost instantly, and pulled back from the wall. Karin; did she know -her-? Cammy knew her from various past internet searches. Cautiously, she looked over the side again. Karin had moved on, but now a boy in shorts and an animal-print t-shirt followed. He was no more than five years old. What kind of mother lets a child walk alone behind her with alligators not 100 feet away?

The boy looked up at Camille. He was John's alright. The same brown eyes, the shape of his mouth. Where was John then?

They shared a smile, he shyly, she reluctantly, and then he ran off, nimble as a fawn.

Cammy continued her hike down the rustic walk. It was a beautiful Saturday, not too crowded. She walked out onto a sort of open porch to view the river and the forest beyond it. Another gator swam against the current seeking purchase on the other side. Something kept them away from her side of the river. She worried about the little boy and cursed his wayward mother.

She had dated John for over a year after college. His family had money and influence, whereas hers had virtually none. She taught English at a middle school now, while John led a marketing firm in the city. Ultimately it came down to sexism. She wanted to work and he wanted a housewife. Never date a conservative, her friends told her, but she shrugged them off. John was handsome, funny, a good lover. They made a sort of pact not to talk about politics and focused on the other, frivolous aspects of their time together: sailing, travel, hiking, and scuba-diving.

When he broke it off with her, she was devastated. Teaching was her life, she really enjoyed it. Her mother had taught high school science and somehow maintained a successful marriage, she tried to reason with John, but he wouldn't hear of it. A year passed and she concentrated on her work. Then she heard that he had married Karin, a Dutch girl who apparently only dabbled in marketing, giving it up to be with this rich American man. Cammy got all this from the net after a feverish search and much speculation.

She went out drinking with her girlfriends, danced with younger guys, almost went home with one. She backed off after her friend Toni whispered, "No! Are you kidding? He's not

much older than the kids in your class!" Cammy did -not- want to be thought of as -that-kind of teacher. It was, in fact, the last time she went carousing, she was so ashamed of herself. So the work came first. She gave up on men for the time being.

The years passed and her reputation flourished. PTA moms honored her dedication, and the kids loved her for it. She was the fun teacher kids remember, wearing costumes to illustrate the stories, bringing history alive to them.

Now, as she walked along, she held her head up and thought of her accomplishments. A cardinal flew from branch to branch. Squirrels chattered up in the trees. It was a beautiful--

Blat!

The pain was shocking. She lay asprawl on the dirt path, having just tripped over an oak root or something. Despite the jeans she was wearing, she pursed her lips at the bruise that was bound to be forming. Cammy caught her breath and slowly got up.

"Are you okay, miss?" a voice said behind her.

Cammy turned around. He was older, not by much, late 30's. Hispanic, nice-looking. All of these key points washed over her. It had been awhile.

"Um, yes, I think."

Camille walked a few steps. She could feel the pain in her knee and upper shin. Had she been in shorts, there'd surely be blood running down her leg by now.

"No, I guess not."

He offered an arm.

"May I help you then?"

Cammy hesitated then accepted the gesture. She'd been on this trail before with John and knew it was a good fifteen minutes before she'd reach the nearest bathroom.

"My name is Pablo," he continued in a faint Cuban accent.

"Camille," she winced, as they walked closely in step.

"A lovely name. French?"

"Me, no. My mother was a fan of a film character of the same name. We're of Irish descent mostly."

His people were Cuban refugees who landed in Miami in the 80's. He was a mechanic for a local Ford dealership. Had lived in Tampa for eleven years. Divorced with a young daughter. The latter revelation came up when she told him her profession.

They reached the snack-bar and she politely broke away to tend to her injury. Inside the ladies' room, she carefully pulled down her jeans and inspected the damage. Thankfully, the clotting had not stuck much to the fabric. She washed it with hot soapy water and bummed a bandaid off a woman in a park uniform, who unlocked the first-aid kit on the wall for it.

Outside, she looked for her samaritan but he had gone. Shrugging her shoulders, she ordered a lemonade slush and a burger from the counterwoman. She sat at a table facing the park pool where a number of kids were splashing about.

"Miss Camille! How are you!"

Cammy glanced over and found a vaguely-remembered teenager. She was a plump black girl with her hair pulled back in a pink barrette.

"Tonya?" Cammy asked after a moment.

"Yes ma'am!" the girl said enthusiastically. Behind her were a couple of adults, the man probably her father saying, "Tonya, let the lady eat in peace."

"No, it's okay. How do you like high school, Tonya?"

"It's different," she stated, less enthused. "I'm in Band, I play the flute. We're learning to march in formation now."

"Really? Well, that's good to hear. Have you kept up with the Anne books? You were so fond of them as I recall."

"Um, no, not so much anymore."

If her skin hadn't been so dark, she would have blushed more perceptibly. Redness showed around the rims of her ears and nostrils.

"But you're still reading, right? That's the most important thing."

"Yes ma'am, I am." Her family was gently nudging her now. "Well, I gotta go now, Miss Cammy. It was nice seeing you."

"You too, Tonya. Take care."

Camille shared friendly nods with her parents and they left the building. She smiled with a sense of pride and finished her meal.

Outside, she headed back to her car down the paved route this time. It was fresh and breezy. The pain was still there -- she had passed on proffered aspirin, it gave her

heartburn -- but now just a duller ache. A family on low-rider bikes trailed past her, chatting and laughing. Couples strolled, some being openly romantic. She didn't mind. She didn't even care when she saw Karin and John haggling over a child-seat in the back of their SUV, with their little boy waiting patiently to be put into it. He smiled at her again, and she smiled back. John looked older, and somehow grayer.

Pablo was standing on the side of the road as she neared the parking lot, taking a video of the upper branches of trees, slowly passing his phone from one side to the other.

"Oh, hello," she said.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes. Better, thank you. Is that one of the newer models? I hear you can make movies with them now, like professional-grade pictures."

"The clarity is much better. This is for my Annie. She's a bit of a tomboy already. Loves the outdoors."

"Well, thanks again for your help. That was very decent of you."

"No problem. Say, are you doing anything tomorrow evening? There is a lecture at the University about global warming and some sort of multi-platform show afterwards that looks interesting. Perhaps, if you're up to it, I could meet you there..."

A nice man, an attractive man, a caring man. These thoughts swam into Camille's consciousness like welcome relief. She smiled as she passed by and went to her car. When she looked back, he was still there, expectant as a teenager.

"We'll see," she said, still smiling.

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## HER REPUTATION

"Whyn't you leave her alone? She ain't hurt you none."

He had his back to her back while Amalie adjusted herself. The elderly woman assailant skulked off, mumbling.

"Are you, umm, decent?" David continued, remaining in place.

"Yes," she said meekly, "Thank you."

David moved away, turning around. His assistant continued to arrange bags of produce on the cold shelves. Her headscarf was back in place and he continued with his own work to give her some space.

When she was hired by the store, there was some protest, but once the women intervened, things calmed down. The women were other staff members from a religious coalition -- Christian, Jewish, Sikh, and Hindu among them -- who welcomed Amalie into the fold. Until recently, she had worked for her father's Turkish bodega. He had retired and sold the store to people who found the young woman's attire too controversial.

The morning continued without incident. Amalie had returned to the warehouse to pick over and clean the fresh produce that had come in. A couple of co-workers were in the coalition and she was at last able to unload on them.

"Old biddy," Catherine Jacobs frowned. "You'd think she'd have better manners!"

"I would have told her off," said Terri Johnson.

"And lost your job for it," returned Catherine, drily.

"I, alas, have no choice in the matter," said Amalie. "My husband is ill -- asthma, you know - - the oak pollen is so terrible this time of year."

"Well, it's a good thing you were born here," said Terri, "I can't imagine what it's like for refugees. Imagine, puttin' a five year old boy in handcuffs! What in the world kind of logic is that?"

"Pretzel logic," said Catherine. "This is -not- what I voted for. I know, I know, they warned us. But this just ain't right."

Terri laughed out loud then said more quietly, "You voted for Orangeman? Lord have mercy..."

"I voted for him," Amalie said, practically under her breath. "What can I say, my family have been Republican as far back as I can remember. My father adored the Reagans; my mother was fond of Nancy. When they broadcast her funeral, she wept all through it."

"Well, I went with Her. Missus Cee," Terri continued. "I'm not ashamed of that, despite everything. She was for *us*, the working women of America."

"She was in it for *herself*," muttered Catherine, hoisting a tote-ful of red cabbage onto a waiting cart. She was a husky woman who had worked on farms since her teens. "Maybe she would have been better for the country, in hindsight, but acting like she was some kind of Susan B. Anthony heroine is pretty dang naive, if you ask me!"

The women continued cleaning off the dirt with high-pressure misters. Amalie was particularly good getting the grit out of spinach and other curly-leafed greens. She bundled measured amounts of them and gently placed them into her tote, sliding it onto the rack when finished.

"David was especially kind today. I wish I could tell him so, or pay him back. That is one of the drawbacks of our culture. I cannot talk to a man I'm not directly related to unless it is business or medical. I am even afraid of telling my husband -- I do not want to upset him in his current state."

"Gotta admire your dedication," Terri said, loading her cart with fragrant citrus. Even after washing up, she still smelled of oranges and lemons when she got home, the essential oils permeating her clothing and hair. She did not voice her thoughts ("Sucks to be you.") however.

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SO

It was raining again.

Millie stood on the balcony of her apartment, sipping tea and watching the rain drip down. Ted groaned in the background. She took no heed.

"*Millie, for chrissake, help me,*" he cried out from his position on the floor.

He was bleeding from the neck and torso. She was annoyed less by the missed shots than by the stain the blood would leave on the sofa he was leaning against. Getting it out of the carpet would have been a breeze, but sofa? How do you explain that to professional steamers? Fine French silk too.

Ted had a mouth on him, didn't he? *A mouth like that earns enemies in this town;* she supposed that she shouldn't have told her girlfriends that over lunch.

Such a lousy shot. Certainly an amateur. Rented out a flat across the way, bided his time, then when the hour arrived he crapped out. Millie sighed and went back inside.

"I'll call the police," she said listlessly.

His words were lost in a soggy gasp.

She got the 911 operator and gave her the details. They would be over ASAP. She hung up the phone.

"They're coming."

Millie went into the bathroom and selected the least frilly hand towels. She ran them under cold tapwater and brought them to him, holding one against his neck. The other wound bled freely from his protuberant belly. She noticed that he had wet himself as well. This she pitied in a moment of humanity.

He had passed out by the time EMS workers arrived. As they carted him off to the hospital, detectives showed up to interview her.

"It all happened so fast," she told them. "I was out on the balcony having my morning tea when Ted came out. He lay... he lay his hand on my shoulder and started to say something... then there were these sounds, like pinging sounds. I remember thinking of the movie *Titanic* when the smokestack breaks free -- that *sound* sort of... I looked around and his hands were at his neck, then one on his belly... oh God, I think I'm going to be sick."

She went into the bathroom and made coughing sounds, flushed the toilet and washed her face. When she stepped out, they were waiting for her with professional sympathy. After

they left, she changed into street clothes and headed to the hospital; she would have to check into a hotel while the crime-scene people did their thing.

Ted was in a coma. His daughter Sasha from a previous marriage was there already, glaring darts of hatred into Millie's face as she arrived.

"Nice of you to show up," Sasha remarked icily. She sat bedside, holding her father's hand.

The family lawyer hovered nearby, along with Ted's agent and some other radio people she barely knew.

"The police needed to talk to me; I was in my nightgown --"

"Oh shut up, Millie!" she cried out, tearfully.

"Ladies, ladies," said Abner, Ted's longtime agent, working the room. "This is neither the time or place for arguing. Millie, dear, have a chair."

He was in his 70's, still spry and healthy. He moved like the dancer he once was, picking up a sturdy wooden chair and positioning it on the other side of the bed for Millie. She sat down and thanked him.

The doctor showed up and gave the lowdown on Ted's condition. They were doing what they could for him but he had lost a lot of blood already and his prognosis was not good. Millie petted Ted's other hand and let a few tears fall. This awful man.

She had married him for his money, she made no pretense at loving this aging shock jock. Money and fame, and all the doors they opened for her. Two or three times a month, she let him have her despite her revulsion for his corpulent flesh. Fortunately, he was not a sixty minute man -- it was always over in ten. She knew of his whores of course, and she knew what the opposing media implied about him and Sasha. This she did not believe and any public denials were genuine. Still, the women did not like each other.

"Deranged fan, perhaps," Abner was muttering to the station manager.

"Let's not rule out terrorists," the lawyer, Tom, suggested.

"Oh God, anything but that!" whispered the radio man.

"Would you low-lifes please take your speculation out of this room?" lashed out Sasha.

The men acquiesced, leaving the two women alone with the victim.

"Let me ask this one thing," Sasha said, pointedly, "Did you have anything to do with this shooting?"

"No! How could you think such a thing?"

"You hate my father for instance."

"I don't hate him. I hate what he does on the radio, I hate the fans who... cross the lines."

"You knew what he was all about, and what it entailed being part of his world."

"Sasha, please. Can we not talk about this now? Your father and I each got what we wanted out of our relationship. It's ...complicated."

Ted slept on, the machine breathing for him, a clean bandage at his neck. His eyes remained motionless beneath their lids. He existed in a dreamless state where he could neither feel nor hear his loved ones.

Millie left first, to a barely audible "Figures!" from Sasha. It was boring. There was no point in waiting. She went to her hotel room, ordered online by Abner, who showed up with a suitcase packed by his young woman assistant. After flashing his credentials to the crime lab people, the girl was able to do her job. Millie ordered dinner, a steak and salad. She watched a movie and fell asleep before it ended.

It was five in the morning when she got the call. Ted had died with his daughter by his side. The media was having a field day. She felt relieved. She wanted to spend the rest of the morning in bed but duty made her shower and change. The assistant had thoughtfully put in a black dress along with the beige and the pink conservative couture outfits. She rightly predicted the evening headline Madame X when she arrived at the hospital.

Privately, she laughed it off. The pre-nup guaranteed her upkeep until she remarried, and that wasn't happening any time soon.

Sasha cursed her upon her entry into the hospital room. Ted's remains had been removed. She went downstairs to see him. He lay on the metal table beneath a sheet, and she nodded when the attendant pulled it back. Abner was there and escorted her out.

He remained by her side as she faced the press.

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# ONE

"Mayzee! You better get in here, girl!"

Nina was measuring rice into a pyrex cup bought when times were good. A pot of water was already boiling on the stove's one good burner. Carefully, she picked up each grain that spilled over the top of the container -- she liked her rice 'dry', so that every grain was separate, not clumped together in a lumpy paste. Satisfied, she dumped the cup into the salted water along with a handful of washed lentils, covered it and lowered the heat to a simmer.

Mayzee Grace walked slowly into the kitchen like a ballet dancer, which is what she had been taking lessons for before her mother's reversal of fortune. She was a slender, mixed-race girl of eleven with a pouf of rusty-blond curls artfully held back with a scarf.

"Child, what is *this* I found in the drawer?"

The short length of red garland looked like an ersatz caterpillar sitting on the countertop.

"It's from last Christmas, after Daddy left. I guess I forgot I put it in there," she said softly. She wasn't one to tell tales, it wasn't in her nature.

"Either take it in your room or throw it away. I about screamed when it popped out, clinging to this fresh dish-towel."

"Yes, Mama."

The girl picked up the shiny tinsel and slipped it into the pocket of her pink after-school overalls.

"In your room or in the trash, young lady," Nina intoned, "I do not want to find pieces of it in the next wash."

"Yes, Mama."

Mayzee returned to her room where she deposited the garland into her keepsake box. It was made by her father, who bought the plain pine box at All-Mart and painted it in pink and gold with her name stenciled on it. He was an artist by university degree but a slacker in nature, which is why he departed soon after Nina lost her job at the call center. Her innate ability not to lie made her incapable of closing a deal, poison for sales-persons in any capacity. Previously she had worked as a hotel clerk, and before that, bank teller.

Nina sighed and sat in the living room to read a woman's magazine. The subscription would run out in three months and she had no plans to renew it; even with the discount, it was too much to rationalize keeping it up. Rationalizing also meant no more wine,

chocolate, choice cuts of meat, and other groceries she'd been accustomed to in the past. She worked here and there through a temp agency, enough to pay the rent and utilities, but not much else. Steven, of course, was no help. He was ordered to provide child-support but consistently claimed poverty due to disability. Back problems, opiate addiction, anything he could put his way through with social workers.

A dozen years ago, he had been a handsome fellow who had a way of charming her into bed and finagling his subsequent live-in status with promises of commissions. He painted signs for a sort of living, painted houses for a better living, but tended to dawdle so that doors tended to stick and windows wouldn't open. All that bending and squatting and stretching in weird angles hurt his back, he said. Then came the visits to the various doctors, hobbling in on crutches, leaving with scrips for muscle relaxers and pain-killers. When Nina had a pain, she did stretching exercises or relaxed against a heating pad, but that took time and Steven had no patience for such simple remedies.

The timer went off and Nina put down her magazine. She walked into the kitchen and checked the pot's contents. Everything had fluffed up all right. She turned off the heat and called for her daughter. Mayzee came in and set the table with two each placemats, plates, salad bowls, silverware, and tumblers. Nina ladled out the rice and lentils onto each plate, then a simple lettuce & tomato salad into the bowls. Mayzee said grace and they dug into their dinner with rote interest. Dessert was apples, something Nina always kept on hand. She leaned toward chubbiness all her life, something she was thankful her daughter did not inherit. It didn't do to be fat and poor, hence their largely vegetarian diet. Real meat was for Sundays and she and Mayzee lunched on tuna or bologna the rest of the week.

After washing the dishes, the two settled in the living room to read – *Anne of Avonlea* for Mayzee, a Toni Morrison novel for her mom. Nina had canceled her cable service months ago. They had radio and they had books; that was entertainment enough. When Mayzee's bedtime arrived, she went to her room while her mother unfolded the futon. Nina had traded places with her daughter after Steven left; besides, the radio reception was stronger in the living room and she could listen to jazz from the college station until she began to doze off.

Mayzee luxuriated in her mother's bed, feeling like a princess in one of her storybooks. To her, doing without was a sort of gift. While classmates walked around staring at tiny screens, she lost herself in Hodgson-Burnett and Montgomery. She didn't have to plug in her dogeared paperbacks and wait for them to be ready. Social media was somebody else's high-tech concept -- she was social after church and in the playground with like-situated children. They were a breed apart and she was happy to be an outsider where once she would have been perfectly normal.

The only problem she had was with boys. Although she attended a girls-only Catholic school, they were always around. On the apartment grounds, in the playground, even at church on Sundays when they were supposed to be subservient and faithful. She was teased about her hair, and her lazy white father, and even because she read books while the other girls were texting and sending them pictures of private things. It was like they knew

she had started her period, scenting her out like wild dogs. It gave her a queasy feeling and she avoided them as much as possible.

After breakfast, and escorting her girl to school, Nina would ready herself for a part-time job at the county library, scanning books for online digital use. It was a dull job but she could see the worth in it. The old books were delicate first editions, some with beautiful line drawings and colored lithographs. She noticed that they didn't bind books like this anymore. The hardcovers she bought at yard sales were plain things with printed titles, instead of engraved directly into the fabric and cardboard, and embellished with gold-leaf.

By three-thirty, she was waiting for Mayzee to escort her home. The sisters -- who had been her own teachers -- had told Nina of the boys' recent interest and she had insisted on being there for her daughter. The girl glided along quietly, holding her hand at cross-streets. Sometimes they stopped off for a few groceries, or school supplies. At the apartment building, they took the stairs up to the second floor. It had once been a motel for tourists and businessmen, with the attendant small kitchens. There was a pool in the middle that was a favored spot in the summertime.

Steven stood up from the wall he'd been leaning on, waiting. His scruffy backpack sat on the landing next to his booted feet. Nina audibly groaned, but Mayzee ran up to him and they hugged.

"No," said Nina, simply.

"Just for the night, babe," he said with just the hint of whine in it.

Nina began to refuse again, then unlocked the door and let him in with them.

"Maze, go to your room. I need to talk to your father."

Mayzee sighed and did as she was told. She used the bathroom and washed up for dinner. They were going to have spaghetti tonight.

A muffled, low-level argument was going on in the front room. She plugged into her radio and listened to the Christian soul station. Uptempo gospel music filled her ears. She was not allowed to listen to Top 40 or other ones right of this station. A few moments later, she heard a rapping on the door and she unplugged.

"Come in," she said.

Her father walked in and squatted by the bed.

"Baby, I guess I'm *not* spending the night here after all."

He held her hand and kissed it, then set a wrapped package on the bed beside her. It was a chocolate sampler; it always was. He left shortly after.

Nina called her into the kitchen.

"You help me with the sauce, 'kay? There's the onions, tomato, green pepper, and mushrooms to slice. I've already peeled the onion and seeded the pepper for you."

Numbly, Mayzee set to her chores. It got easier as she got into the groove of things. The freshness of the ingredients, the bright colors, and the promise of good things to come. They were one together and that was all that really mattered.

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CHANGES

The three girls stumbled out of the desert in sequined cocktail dresses, sun-parched and wind-blown. Their skirts were torn in places, some showing dried blood where they had stumbled and skinned a knee. All were barefoot, having discarded their useless high-heels days before.

They stood by the highway weeping with the joy of finally finding some semblance of civilization. One was black, one blonde and fair-skinned with a sunburn on her bare arms and cleavage, the other a wry brunette tanned from years poolside. They continued walking up the road until they reached a shack selling maps and desert trinkets.

"Can I help you ladies?" An old-timer croaked from behind the counter.

"Water will do," said the tanned girl, drily.

"Comin' right up," the old fellow said, shuffling over to a cooler to extract three bottles of mineral water. He set them on the counter and said, "\$4.59."

The black girl sighed defiantly and swept up the drink, opening it and chugging down half. The blonde meekly took hers and did the same. The brunette with the tan undid her top and let the old dude have a look at her bare breasts for a full minute, then zipped up and took her drink.

"I guess you ain't got yore purses wit ya!" he cackled appreciatively. "They's on the house then, and thank you kindly for the freebie. Car break down or somethin'?"

"Somethin'," the black chick repeated. "I guess you haven't heard about Vegas then?"

"Some kind er to-do from the static on the radio I wager," he nodded. "Ain't got no TV since they switched to cable in 0-8. College station reporting somethin' about a bomb done gone off at three casinos in a row and other places. What the hail the country comin' to anyhow!"

The blonde broke out in long-suppressed tears. She sat down on a white plastic chair in one corner holding her face in her hands. The black girl, taking another chair, comforted her.

"Britney baby, it's all right. We safe for now, girl."

"Got any thing we can change into? Also something to eat?" the brunette asked bluntly. She'd had enough of Britney's whining already.

"Um, well..." the codger said, rifling through a row of dusty, branded t-shirts, "There's these. Maybe the men's sizes you could wear like dresses. Them flip-flops for yore feet too."

"We'll pay you back, don't worry," she said, "Changing room?"

"Ladies in the back," he gestured with a backwards thumb.

The black girl and Britney followed their cohort into the two-stall room, which was reasonably clean but dimly-lit with a single working fluorescent tube in the ceiling. After stripping down to their panties and washing off the accumulated sweat and dust, the brunette, Samantha, donned a white tee with a beer logo across the chest; Britney wore a blue tee with a glaring bald eagle; and Sonia took a gray one with a ULV logo. Each toed on their pastel-colored rubber sandals and did what they could with their hair.

When they reemerged, the old man had bowls of potato chips, cheez doodles, and pretzels waiting for them alongside bottles of cold cola. It was better than nothing, and they devoured the simple repast gladly.

Afterwards, they asked for use of a telephone but the old fellow shook his head.

"No service in a coupla days. If you'd care to wait, my son-in-law will be by at six to pick me up. Phones don't work in town either but you could probably talk to the sheriff or the padre. They might figure out somethin' for you."

"Thank you very much," said Britney, reverting to a schoolgirl politeness her companions lacked. She had come to Vegas for a talent competition two years earlier, lost the prize but performed sufficiently well to get a gig singing backup at one of the lesser casinos. This is where she met Sonia and Samantha.

The girls sat and flipped through the few papers and magazines available. Eventually, each used the ladies room again as their greasy meal worked its magic on their pampered bowels. No one came into the shack, though they saw a couple of big-rig trucks zoom by. Sonia frowned when Sam said "N. O." to her idea of flagging one down.

"Be one thing if we were wearing jeans and, you know, packing heat. There is no way in hell I'm standing on the side of the road in this getup."

The tees fell to their knees and looked like ersatz house-dresses of the trailer park variety. Sam had left that lifestyle far behind in Delray Beach to go back to it now. She had been in Vegas five years, landing first with a pop quartet that broke up after 7 months of dive bars and a dodgy 'agent'. Waitressing paid better wages.

Sonia (born Tyrese) was the oldest of the trio. She had grown up in South Central where boys in dresses were *not* warmly received. She moved up to Oakland to begin her transition with seed money from a loving aunt, eventually landing in Vegas.

A little after six, the son-in-law showed up in an older model SUV. After a moment's skepticism, he hauled the girls into the small town after obtaining their contact info. Thirty-five bucks in clothes and eats meant a lot to people just barely scratching by and they agreed to pay it back.

Dropped off at the parish church, the girls entered the old adobe structure through weathered wooden doors. Inside was a middle-aged woman in a dowdy brown dress tapping away at an old-school electric typewriter. She looked up kindly but a bit shocked at the sight and asked, "May I help you?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Britney, whose slight curtsey caused an unseen eyeroll from her companions (who called her Pollyanna behind her back) , "Perhaps you have heard of the explosions in the city--"

"Oh my, yes! Terrible business, but it is such a sinful place it doesn't surprise me a bit."

"Well, um, Ma'am," Britney continued carefully, "We live there , or we did up until the incident. We fled with the clothes on our backs, which were less suitable than our current attire. Cocktail dresses, not ... you know..."

"We are a class act," Sonia asserted.

"Anyhow," Sam butted in, "In the confusion, we left our purses behind and lost our shoes in the desert--"

"Oh dear!" said the lady, standing up. She patted her hands together, then clasped the fingers. "I suppose this -is- an emergency. We have a closet here--"

She stepped from behind her desk and went to a door near the entrance. Inside was a rack of used clothing and a few knick-knacks.

"You girls should find something better in here. Nothing too flashy, mind you."

"Oh, that's alright," Britney said, smiling. Twenty minutes later, the trio stepped out in boy's worn jeans and belts to accompany their new t-shirts.

"Is there a bank of some kind in the village?" Sam asked next.

"No, I'm afraid not here. We have an ATM next to the general store..."

Sam sighed heavily and tried not to curse. She was a tough chick but she respected the church.

"You see, we are already in debt to Archie Molina, the son-in-law of the older man who runs the little store down the road. These shirts and some food."

"Oh, that old scallywag Marvin Tucker! Ain't nobody ever shows up at that shack anymore, unless they're desperate. Archibald stocks it once in awhile to, you know, keep up the illusion. It gives the old fellow something to do. I'd wager those shirts are more'n ten years old; more like five dollars total you owe!"

Sonia smirked and nudged Samantha. Britney blushed beneath her peeling burn.

"Well, then is there some place we can spend the night and somehow get back to the city?" Samantha continued. "We're tired, temporarily broke, and so on."

"I will have to consult with Father Thomas on this issue," the lady said more formally than before. "You wait here."

She went through another door, back of the desk. Muffled voices conversed and she soon returned followed by a priest in a black suit and white collar. Somehow, Sam was expecting him to be dressed as Father Serra. His rugged good looks were a bit off-putting.

"I understand you ladies have been through a bit of an ordeal," he said in a courtly New England accent. He was in his sixties with close-cropped gray hair and gold-rimmed glasses. Britney was reminded of Robert DeNiro. "Please, sit."

The trio sat on a plain mission-style bench as the priest took a folding metal chair brought to him by his secretary.

After unloading their story -- performing one night two days past at a casino, the series of loud explosions, alarms going off, staff and guests fleeing every which way -- he rubbed his chin and mulled it over.

"We have no motel here, but I think I can farm you out to a couple of my parishioners. Mrs. Douglas, do you think you have room for one more?"

He glanced back at the secretary, who blushed and, after a moment's hesitation, nodded.

"Yes, Father, I can take one young lady in." She nodded at Britney pointedly.

It took considerable restraint for the other women not to roll their eyes.

"Please contact the others you think suitable for the remaining two. Good evening, ladies," he said, standing and walking back into his private office.

Sonia wound up with a Mexican family, in a twin bed while it's usual occupant doubled-up with her sister in the other. Sam stayed with the store-keeper and his wife, sacking out on their faded green sofa. The people were cordial, under the unusual circumstances, providing simple dinners as well to three Vegas showgirls condoned by the usually stern parish priest.

In the morning, after good night's sleep and breakfast, the trio moseyed into the sheriff's office. It was smallish room with two desks and a coffee urn. The sheriff was the priest's age, a little more suspicious but willing to help. Like Mrs. Douglas, he chuckled at Marvin's petty larceny, then gave them fresh news from the city. The bombings had been relatively minor, more likely domestic in nature in the criminal underworld sense. It was Vegas after all. He would give them a ride back as soon as his deputy hauled 'his sorry ass in, excuse my language.'

By that noon, the women were dropped off at the apartment house they lived in. He waited while Sam brought down some hidden cash for the priest to redistribute -- she had been let into her flat by the landlord, who subsequently let in his other two tenants. Each of them bathed and tried calling in to work, but there was only a recording saying the casino was closed til further notice could be issued. They then called co-workers who were mostly happy to hear from them. One, a waitress, said that all belongings left behind had been processed by the police and would be available at their office downtown. The phones had been out through half of the city until early that morning.

"It's been crazy, Sammi," Jenette told her pal, "We thought it was, you know, the Big One. Rumor has it that Lance [the lounge singer the girls backed] messed his pants after he ran out of there -- and not just number 1! The mob, I dunno..."

Samantha listened politely for another few minutes then begged off. She was thinking of the long, hot walk, getting lost and then getting found again. Marvin's innate decency. The no-nonsense priest and the grocer giving her safe haven. The kindness of strangers she had thought was just an old-fashioned virtue.

She called up Britney and Sonia.

"You girls busy? We ought to talk."

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## DIGNITY

Andrea Carver got off the bus and began her trek home. It was 6:30 AM and there were patches of dense fog in her neighborhood. Her feet were tired from a night of rounds at the county hospital. She wore a brown sweater over her uniform that cut back some of the chill. Her white oxfords padded along the crumbling concrete sidewalk to her house. At the corner where a large sign proclaimed Wilton Estates (an ironic name for a collection of 70's-era ranch houses) something pale stuck out on the ground behind it. Her tired eyes didn't register it until she had passed by, and then she quickly returned. It was a human arm, the hand clutching the grass. She crouched down and saw the rest of the nude form, pale white flesh. Andrea instinctively felt for a pulse but to no avail.

She ran to the first house with light in the window, the Thomases, and banged on the front door.

"Call 911!" she cried, "There is a dead woman over there!"

This was years before cell phones had become ubiquitous, else she would have done it herself. The police were summoned and the body photographed and removed. After she was interviewed, Andrea continued home. James was up and getting ready for work. He saw his wife's distraught appearance and held her close. She sat down and explained it to him; he offered to call in sick, but she waved him off.

"No, no, I'll be alright. I just need to get some sleep. Thank God I have a free day tomorrow."

James left for his job managing a department store and Andrea changed out of her uniform. She took a shower and pulled on a nightgown. She lay down on their bed and slept until noon, then got up and changed into a housedress to make herself lunch. Andrea sat before a folding tray with a bowl of soup and a sandwich on it. She was in the living room and turned on the TV. The afternoon news was just ending but they appeared to repeat the top story which was about a woman's body found in a subdivision who was unidentified pending contact with her family. Although she empathized with the victim, she had seen many deaths at the hospital over 23 years. She shrugged her shoulders and prayed that the killer didn't live in her neighborhood.

Andrea watched a black and white movie on the local UHF channel, ironically a Sherlock Holmes flick. Afterwards, she called her daughter, Cynthia for a chat. The girl was a housewife in Lakeland, her husband Kyle, an insurance agent.

"Oh Mother, how are you doing!" Cynthia said, concerned.

"I'm alright I guess. I see death all the time but not this close to home. She was naked and cold, a terrible way to go."

She had brown hair done up in an old-fashioned style, Andrea remembered, not telling her daughter. Like she stepped out of a Gay 90's revue. Her figure was lithe like a dancer's.

"Probably a prostitute," Cynthia said, knowingly.

"I hope so," Andrea blurted. "I mean I hope she isn't from around here. Imagine if her family found her like that. Your father and I know most of the people in our neighborhood though, and I don't recall seeing this girl before."

The gruesome topic was soon discarded for impending baby news -- Cynthia was three months pregnant with her first child.

At the time, the mid 1980's, the body of the girl was never identified. Her fingerprints were not on file, nor were her dental records. Despite a public appeal, no one came forth to claim her. She was buried in a potter's field under the marker JD3786 -- Jane Doe, March 7, 1986 -- just another cold case to file away.

In 2016, thirty years after her death, a team of forensic specialists had her body dug up to try and determine who she was and where she came from, with the help of digitized pathology records. A woman named Sofia Menendez went missing around that time in Argentina. She had been disowned by her family for obtaining an illegal abortion of her illegitimate child. They would have had no way at the time to have known of the body.

It was determined that Menendez made her way to Florida perhaps through smuggling, to serve as a menial worker or prostitute. The pathologist did find evidence of the latter. The abortion sterilized her, she was free to have multiple sexual partners. She was disease-free; her fair skin and beauty suggested that she worked as a call girl with clients who used condoms at a time when HIV was prevalent. At some point, she ran away from the brothel with enough money to live on and wound up in Tampa Bay, searching legitimate employment.

At least one company still had her application on file, responding to a public request. An over-zealous human resources officer at a chain department store had kept her app because of her good looks and self-assuredness; she had not been hired because she had no papers, with a note that she would return within the week with the required information. The detectives speculated that, with her underworld connections, she would obtain illegal documents, and this most likely is how she was located by her pimp. She had been raped, and then killed by suffocation.

James Carver had been manager of the department store at the time. He had died in 2014, age 84; however, his widow, Andrea, still lived in the little ranch-style house at 20 Buckingham Road. When the detectives arrived to interview her, they were met at the door by her grandson Jim. The elderly Andrea Carver sat in a wheelchair attended by her daughter, Cynthia and son-in-law Kyle Graham.

On the coffee table was an open leather suitcase, with a packet of clothing and an old phonograph album by Linda Ronstadt.

"My husband was a big fan of her," Mrs Carver said, looking up at the detectives. "I don't know why I kept these things, but I guess God told me to, in His own way."

The items had been found in a storage shed, said Kyle Graham. There was a dress, a pair of panties, gold earrings, a purse, and a pair of pumps. They had been neatly wrapped in tissue paper and stored in the suitcase, along with the album. On the sepia-toned cover of the album, the singer sat before a mirror, doing her elaborate Victorian hairstyle. Inside the album, along with the vinyl disc in its paper sleeve, was a clipping of hair tied with a piece of velvet ribbon.

"I remember this ribbon," Cynthia said, "I left a roll of it behind when I left home to marry Kyle."

The hair sample was determined to belong to Sofia Menendez, the Jane Doe with the vintage hairstyle. Traces of semen were found on the dress and panties; the blood-type was related to the Carver family. It was believed that the killing had been a one-time event for James; no other evidence suggested past victims. Menendez had evidently returned to the store and was met by Carver, who drove her back to his house while his wife was at the hospital. The desperate girl had gone through with it to get the job, then tried to get away after the assault. Bruises on her thighs and wrists attested to this speculation. Why he stowed the body behind the entryway sign remained a mystery. Perhaps he had it in for a neighbor, who knew.

A representative of the Menendez family arrived to take the body home. Though Sofia remained a disgrace to her late elders, her siblings still cared about her and wanted her to have a Christian burial.

"One family finds closure, another faces a disgrace," said one detective as they closed the case.

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GRACE

"God has a way of piling on the hardships as a test for us," Genelle Tomlin was saying to her granddaughter, Ailene.

They were sitting on a park bench in front of the VA hospital where Genelle's husband was admitted for testing. Cale Andrews was 79 and after a lifetime of heavy smoking and drinking, his heart and lungs were just about shot. He could no longer drive a truck or simply make it from the front door to the mailbox without a struggle.

Ailene looked at the cigarette she was smoking and after a beat, stubbed it out on the concrete walkway with her boot. Her gran was also referring to the hurricane currently barreling its way up the west coast of Florida. It had already plowed through Haiti and part of Cuba, and played havoc with Key West and Fort Myers. They were in Tampa; whether it was going to land there or head out to New Orleans, nobody knew quite yet.

Genelle had been married to Cale since 1958, and they had lived in the Tampa rural suburb Guava the last 23. He had served in Vietnam and was honorably discharged in 1967. From that year to 2005 he had driven semis, initially cross-country and then solely within the state since the mid-80's for a grocery chain.

The family owned a two-acre plot of land and a manufactured home that sat on several four-foot high concrete supports. They lived near a creek that frequently flooded during the rainy season, as it was now. A foot of water currently surrounded the lower half of their property, making the storage-shed appear to be floating like a ship at anchor.

The couple had two children: Ailene's mother, Donna (b. 1960), and Cale Jr. (b. 1963). Cale had died in the early years of the Iraq war while leading his troops into battle. He left behind a young wife and son. That boy, Kevin, was now an aimless teenager; his mother, Susan, was a depressive who barely scraped by as a waitress. Ailene joined the Army at nineteen, partly to serve as a role model for her young cousin. A brawny girl, like her grandfather had been in his prime, she had become an MP and remained state-side for the last three years after two tours overseas.

The wind picked up stray strands of the old woman's white hair and waved them around. She wore her hair long and tied back in a ponytail as she had done most of her life. Ailene wanted to catch them and insert them into the black scrunchie back of her grandmother's head, but let them fly. Genelle was not a vain woman; she dressed simply, as now in a plain white blouse, blue stretch pants, and black slip-ons. Her faux-tortoiseshell glasses magnified her brown eyes to almost comical proportions.

Ailene was in uniform khakis and boots. Like her gran, she wore no makeup or jewelry, except for a plain gold band. The ring was from a beau who served in Afghanistan whom she had limited contact with of late. Carrying a torch as they used to say. 'Lost cause' said her mother Donna, hungry for grandchildren. Ailene's brother Tommy was gay and a

disappointment to his folks, even though he had a good job and a steady boyfriend. Ailene adored him despite what everybody else said.

A jet flew over head, then another, making Genelle jump a little.

"Manuevers, Gran," Ailene said reassuringly, "They're from Pensacola, no big deal."

"War, 'cane, flood, your granddad -- that's a big deal."

"I know, Gran. I jus--"

"I don't know what I'm gonna do without that man!" Genelle suddenly wailed. "Sixty years we been together, day in and day out. Sittin' at home with your momma and uncle -- God bless his soul -- while he was in Nam. The years of loneliness while he was out galivantin' across the country like Claude Akins and Boxcar Willie combined. I tell you, it's more than a woman can stand sometimes!"

Ailene threw one strong arm around the old lady and held her as gently as possible. She was used to strong-arming drunken GIs out of bar-fights, and training other soldiers in martial arts. Her gran wept into three layers of moist tissues before she drew back and composed herself.

"I think I need a drink," she said shortly. "A whiskey if possible."

Ailene held back a chuckle.

"Sure Gramma," she said, "I think we could both use one."

The two walked down the street to a bar frequented by enlisted men. The TV was on, set to a ball game, with a rolling headline of current weather conditions. A pair of younger soldiers, male and female, both black, played a game of pool while a civilian and another white guy watched the game from the bar.

"Howdy, Sarge," the soldier at the bar said, tipping his hat to Ailene.

"How do, Mike? Couple of whiskies here, please," she said to the Asian woman barkeep.

"Yes Ma'am," she said, pulling up two tumblers and filling them from a bottle on the counter.

"On me," said the soldier, a captain by his insignia.

"Thanks, Mike. This is my grandma, by the way. Gramps is at the hospital for tests."

"Pleased to meetcha," the cap said, shaking the older lady's hand briefly.

"Likewise, I'm sure," Genelle said, perking up. "How's the game going?"

"Rays are leading for a change."

"That's good." She took a swig of her drink, "Thank ye kindly."

"No problem, ma'am."

Genelle and Ailene sat in a booth, alternately watching the game and the pool-players.

"Nice caboose on that young feller," Genelle drawled after another sip.

"Grama!" Aileen sputtered.

The girl player apparently also heard the comment and laughed at her partner, who only grumbled something unintelligible.

"Just trying to make you laugh, hon'," she said, "No offense, son," she added.

"None taken, ma'am," the youth answered, still figuring out his shot. He aimed and two balls caromed into opposite holes.

"Grace under fire," Genelle said sagely, "There's a future for that lad."

Years of experience had taught her never to call a black man 'boy'. Ailene admired her for that, knowing full well Genelle was raised in the segregated South.

"Grace under fire," Ailene repeated, glancing at the weather report, with its enormous swath of storm on radar hurtling their way.

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## FAMILY

Opal's cat, a lean calico with inquisitive blue eyes, leaped from floor to counter to refrigerator top to the opposite counter as she made herself a toasted bologna sandwich. Rainy days made her hungry for some reason; she'd already had a large bowl of chili and rice earlier in the afternoon.

"You eat in an hour, Jake, this is momma's food," she said as she elbowed him away. She added a slice of lettuce and a dab of low-fat mayo, and carried it to the dinette table. Opal sipped from a glass of iced tea and contemplated the rain. Jake leaped up on the table, his furry face just inches away from the blue plastic plate.

"Jake, go 'way now. Momma's not in the mood."

Something in the tone of her voice made Jake jump back down on the floor. He lingered at the cat flap in the kitchen door, hoping to find a lizard or other critter to chew on until dinner, but the downpour held him back. He resigned himself to slink into the living room and groom his fur.

Opal finished her nosh and put the plate and glass in the sink to wash later. A trio of mosquitoes danced against the kitchen window to her disgust. It had been unseasonably warm of late and she did not relish going outside today. Tim was at work, delivering packages for Govex, and the kids would be coming home from school any minute. What to make for dinner on their tight budget?

She surveyed the refrigerator, pulled out some onions, tomatoes, and carrots, and set about cleaning them. These she sliced and fried in a pan of vegetable oil, then added a pound of ground pork and some seasonings. Meanwhile, she cooked up a pot of white rice and set it to simmer dry. She hated that mushy wet rice called risotto; she'd rather bite on an occasional dry kernel than let it slop around in her mouth like baby food.

Abilene and Dallas showed up right on time. It was not her idea to name their 12 and 14 year olds after Texas towns; that was Tim's genius moment. There was nothing remotely country music about the two, her son with his neo-goth look, her daughter more prone to grunge. Tim could accept the weird haircut on his son but balked at the black eyeliner.

"Boy looks like an Egyptian in that," he told her one evening in bed. "Where do they get these ideas, O'?"

Opal had only shrugged her shoulders and continued watching her nighttime soap. It was the early 90's, after the Gulf War. In their rooms, the children slept under posters of Kurt Cobain, and The Cure.

"What's for dinner, Ma?" Abilene chimed, then looked under the lid. "Oh."

"You were expecting beef stroganoff? Are you aware of the price of beef these days?"

Abilene rolled her eyes and schlumped into her chair at the table.

"Maybe would could be vegetarians," she said hopefully.

"Not on your feckin' life," Dallas said, sitting opposite her.

"Dallas, you watch your mouth!"

"Feck, Ma, I said feck."

"That is beside the point. You know darn well what that sounds like."

"Darn? Don't you mean da--"

"Dal, I mean it... you kids go wash up first. Your father will be home any minute."

Resignedly, the children walked deeper into the house to take turns at the bathroom sink. They smiled and flicked soapy water at each other.

"'Darn'..." Abby said, chuckling.

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Tim arrived a little late. He was a tan, wiry fellow with short black hair. He kissed Opal on the cheek and went into the bathroom to freshen up before dinner, changing his shirt from sweaty khaki to a clean blue polo.

Opal said grace and the family dug in to the simple meal. There was a jello salad for dessert. Again, Abby brought up vegetarianism.

"You know that's made from cow hoofs," she said pointedly as her brother shoveled a spoonful into his mouth.

"You don't mind eating it," Tim said, nodding at her near-empty bowl.

The girl sighed. "I was ...hungry."

"Uh-huh," said both Tim and Dallas simultaneously.

"Dad-dy!"

"Maybe I could make something separate for you tomorrow night, honey," Opal said, playing mediator. "They're basically sides; go over there and pull out that cook-book Grandma gave us last Christmas. Should be something in there for you."

The girl left the table and took the book to the rocker in the corner, and flipped through it. Dallas helped his mother with the dishes while Tim sat on the sofa to watch a game show.

"What's going on with your sister, Dal?"

Mother and son stood at the sink, she washing and he drying.

"Oh, I dunno. Boys probably. She likes Nirvana, they like Pearl Jam -- especially the boys she likes. But Kurt is like, I don't know, Bob Dylan to her."

"That bad, eh?" Opal joked. Her tastes ran more to Lynn Anderson and Glen Campbell. "This Cobain fellow a vegetarian?"

"Dunno, probably. His wife is really weird, kind of a loudmouth skankwoman."

"Hmm."

"She's not doing drugs, Mom. Not that I know of," he blurted, anticipating the next question.

"Well I certainly hope not. You know how your daddy and I feel about that."

"Yes... ma'am."

They finished their chore and Dallas joined his dad on the sofa. Jake leaped upon his chest and curled up in his lap while Dallas stroked his head.

"What is: the Tower of Pisa," he said after a moment, as the contestant got it wrong.

"Very good, son," said Tim, patting him on the knee.

Opal smiled and took care of business in the bathroom. When she emerged, she found her daughter in her bedroom, still flipping through the cookbook as she lay on her bed.

"Find anything, darlin'?" Opal entered the room tentatively.

"Come see this!" Abby said, motioning her over.

Opal went around to the other side of the bed and skooched over. They leaned against the white rattan head-board and looked at an elaborate curry dish in the color photo.

"Mmm, pretty," Opal said, casually draping her arm around her daughter's warm shoulders.

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NO SHE DIDN'T

When Ivy got the call that she'd been hired by Salome Online, she was ecstatic. They had seen her editorials for the 'historically-black college' she had recently graduated from and liked what she wrote. Not 'loved'; Salome rarely loved anything. They were an established women's e-magazine for the post-college crowd and wrote archly about culture, politics, relationships and so on, almost always from a white, upper-middle-class, Jewish girl perspective, so it was a bit of a shock when she was hired on.

When she told her friends about it, their reaction was mixed. Added to the general congratulations were skeptical remarks like,

"You sure you want to do this, girl?"

"Won't you be the only African-American writer there? This -is- the 21st Century, right?"

"Sell out!"

It was a job, that was all Ivy cared about at that point. She had sent her qualifications to several magazines and newspapers, and gotten a few responses, but none so impressive as this. Besides, it was in downtown Tampa. She had chosen to settle here in the city's burbs after Atlanta, taking a marketing job with an alternative weekly that barely paid anything.

"You know, they've all had abortions and, like, wear it as a badge of honor," Ivy's sister Natalie had told her.

Ivy had never had an abortion, didn't support abortion anyway unless of rape or if it saved the mother's life. But she felt left out of the mainstream of this supposedly feminist publication. It was as if they expected her to find a man, get pregnant by him, then sacrifice the child to join their cultish group.

She was also the only Protestant on staff, raised Methodist. The others were mostly Jews and (lapsed) Catholics. She was seated with one of the few male writers, a muscular white dude whom she gradually realized was gay. He mostly wrote about politics, and occasionally accompanied the women reporters to demonstrations where his burliness was an asset. He shared an apartment with a petite editor he'd known since high school. The other women often teased her about the arrangement, suggesting that she liked to spy on him while he took showers and so on. Ivy found their attitude awfully like high school for such a respected journal.

One of the regular features of their online presence was a live show where various regulars would talk about the news of the week. Although she was getting a lot of stories published, Ivy thought it odd she was never invited to appear on camera herself. It was weird watching these women whose black people experience was limited to tech crew, marketing, and accounting talking about issues affecting the African American community. A few of them talked to her about such issues but for some reason, she never got to appear on the set. She was an attractive woman, not a movie star, but men occasionally turned their heads her way in appreciation. No, that couldn't be it -- some of the women who did the show were pretty homely.

She began to notice 'why isn't Ivy on the show' remarks in the comments sections of her articles, a thing the editors strongly opposed writers from doing unless it was a correction of a typo or other provably wrong information. One writer was even reprimanded for posting answers under her own name to commenters. 'Breaking the fourth wall' was how it was put to the offender, who was then suspended for a couple of days... until her appearance on the live show. Ivy noted that the commenters had familiar handles from her social media; Natalie, Sharise, Tonda, and Marisa eventually admitted it was their doing. They wanted to organize a write-in campaign; Natalie even suggested a boycott of Salome.

"Noooo!" Ivy actually called her up to say, "Do not rock the boat, Natty. I'm okay with this, really. Remember how I used to freeze up when we did this in college debates?"

"Like a rabbit gone 'tharn'," Natalie snorted, "Yeah, I remember."

"When it comes, if it comes, I'll deal with it."

"Mmm, okay," she said, not too hopefully.

Eventually, Ivy's chance did come. It was a couple of days after a theater awards ceremony, which was dominated by wins for an August Wilson revival. A revered, older black actress shouted out an obscene description of the current US president, the first part of which somehow went out live to most of the East Coast. The conservative backlash was massive, to the point that someone shot up the lady's front door early that morning.

Ivy sat at the makeshift set-desk, submitting to a patting of makeup. Gordon, the muscle-man, sat three feet away also not enjoying his touch-up. He had rough skin from a bad bout of teen acne ten years before, he told her in his wrenchingly honest way. They had become friends over the past few months, the first white gay guy she'd known intimately. He was aware of the gossip, shrugging it off, but Ivy sensed it hurt him.

The set manager gave them a brief run-through of the day's stories and then counted down backwards from five. The lights brightened on set and the show started. Gordon talked about the awards show, rattled off a few wins, then brought up the subject on everyone's mind. Ivy had been nodding and murmuring assent so far. She was ready for the story and spoke surprisingly well about it. The incident was no worse than what she'd heard on the music and movie awards shows, especially the video music shows. She was appalled by the hateful rhetoric hurled at the 83 year-old actress, as was Gordon, though she was taken aback by his comparison of it to a terrible hate crime of fifteen years before.

"This is not quite in the manner of being dragged through the mud til your head pops off," she said in a surprisingly blunt way, "Or being tied to a fence half-dressed in the depth of winter."

Gordon looked at her with something like awe.

"But she's bla--"

"I don't care what color you are; disrespecting the office with filthy language is sinking to the level of AM radio pundits. I'm sorry, but that's the way I was raised."

The show suddenly suffered technical difficulties and the live feed snapped off.

"What was -that- about?!" Gordon and the woman director said almost in unison.

"I just answered truthfully," Ivy shrugged. "Isn't that what we're here for? Last week, Hannah did that amazing editorial about Roe v. Wade that even impressed me..."

"That's different," the manager said, then backtracked, "Wait, what do you mean 'even'?"

"I don't support abortion on demand."

The words just sort of fell out of Ivy's mouth like sodden cherry pits. She was suddenly exhausted, physically and emotionally. Gordon blushed furiously and sidled off the stage to go hide in his cubicle. The stage manager's mouth literally fell open in shock.

Ivy was suspended for a week.

